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ABSTRACT

Teaching public relations from an American perspective should be reconsidered: current textbooks barely mention multicultural and international concerns except in most cases as a secondary issue. The current paradigm emphasizes the media with the first amendment serving as the cornerstone of the emphasis. The American approach to international and multicultural concerns is primarily an "awareness" emphasis. The difficulty in clearly understanding the operating premises of other cultures was demonstrated when a public relations educator from the United Arab Emirate and an American public relations class had trouble articulating their cultures' underlying premises (first amendment versus a religious source). Three changes need to be considered to work toward developing an international community: (1) a paradigm shift away from the concept of publics to interpersonal communication; (2) multicultural training instead of an awareness approach to culture should be the goal in teaching public relations; and (3) teaching future professionals to learn to appreciate other cultures and to gain greater insights and understanding about each other's culture. These steps will require significant change towards teaching public relations. Shifting the paradigm towards interpersonal communication while providing indepth multicultural training will provide the basis for a more sensitive cultural exchange and will more likely support the building of an international community. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/RS)

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TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS FROM AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE: AN ASSUMPTION TO BE RECONSIDERED

ED 383 029

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TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS FROM AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE: AN ASSUMPTION TO BE RECONSIDERED

ABSTRACT

Teaching public relations from an American perspective should be reconsidered. Current textbooks barely mention multicultural and international concerns except in most cases as a secondary issue. In order to work toward developing an international community, it is proposed that three changes be seriously considered:

1). A paradigm shift away from the concept of publics to interpersonal communication. This shift would deemphasize the importance of the media and bring the concept of networking to the forefront. This shift would be more compatible with an international community goal. There is already evidence that the more democratic countries like Australia do not consider the first amendment key to their teaching of public relations and consequently are building their own library of case studies.

2) Multicultural training instead of an awareness approach to culture should be the goal in teaching public relations. Students should be learning to operate in different cultures rather than simply given a few suggestions about behavior. Plus by emphasizing awareness approaches there is a tendency to be confused when dealing with other cultures.

3) Teaching future professionals to learn to appreciate other cultures and to gain greater insights and understanding about each other's cultures is necessary. This exchange should lead to less misunderstanding and more relationship building. Such an approach takes time, takes a tolerance of other views, and a specific effort to know where a person is coming from while applying your own knowledge of the American culture as a comparative basis. Such a focus can has very insightful moments into both cultures.

Ultimately these three steps are very major and will require a significant change towards teaching public relations. However, by shifting the paradigm towards interpersonal communication while providing indepth multicultural training will provide the basis for a more sensitive cultural exchange. Plus these approaches will more likely support the building of an international community--a goal worth striving for.

TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS FROM AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE: AN ASSUMPTION TO BE RECONSIDERED

Teaching public relations from an American perspective is rarely questioned. The assumption that public relations is inherently an American institution which needs to be exported to other countries complicates the issue.

A review of the most frequently required textbooks suggest that, at best, public relations is mentioned in a few paragraphs as an international activity. Even more unlikely is there to be a mention of cultural differences. In case studies, for example, an international orientation would be secondary. Walsh and Center's case study on crises communication includes a situation of an airplane crash in Canada but the Canadian police and media were not seriously discussed other than obviously being first on the site of the accident. There is not a significant discussion on how cultural differences may have impacted the outcome. Hendrix's Public Relations Cases Includes "relations with special publics" and has a case study called "Unidos Contra in Diabetes" (United Against Diabetes). Some of the observations include that "the oldest woman in the family frequently makes most family health case decisions in the Hispanic community" (Hendrix, 95, 366). But the implication this is a small group of people different from the mainstream is matched by the meager analysis of the multicultural aspects.

Such is the status of public relations teaching. In the model of public relations developed in 1987 by representatives of various PR professions, international (not multicultural) communication was listed as one of the needs but only after the 5 core courses had been established. Also the emphasis was on "one" extra course--not integrating international and multicultural communication into the fabric of every public relations course offered.

So the need is to

1) realize that the American perspective which dominates public relations teaching here is limiting the students' understanding of how public relations is practiced,

2) note that going beyond the American experience is more than just an awareness effort (one course) but an ongoing integration of international and multicultural concepts into the entire course of study, and

3) realize that an international and multicultural integrated approach should be applied in professional interaction and is critical to creating an international community.

Here I am proposing three strategies for overcoming these biases and limited perspectives. It is important that to note 1) the limitations of the status quo, 2) the need for a paradigm shift, 3) the place of multicultural training (beyond awareness) in public relations, and 4) the importance of learning and appreciating others cultures through a direct effort to exchange such knowledge. This latter approach is especially important in terms of building towards an international community among public relations educators and professionals.

THE STATUS QUO

Teaching multicultural and international concepts from our present texts is rather difficult. As noted in one of my previous papers:

> Going international is not a simple matter. There seems to be various levels of knowledge that are demanded and include: 1) knowledge of the culture, 2) knowledge of a foreign language, 3) skills in multicultural negotiation. (Neff, 1992)

To test my hypothesis that public relations students were not learning enough multicultural and international ideas, an advance public relations class was given a unit that focused on case studies in other countries (selected from a reader which was not specifically focused on public relations but on organizational campaigns). The reaction was generally one of shock. The first

first amendment (cornerstone of American public relations) was of no great importance. In fact, there was much evidence to suggest that coercion and propaganda were readily used. The topics, per se, were odd to them. A campaign on snails or rat reduction certainly did not seem appealing. Lastly, the sensitivity to cultural differences was greatly lacking. In noting that the color of condoms was very critical to the birth control campaign in Haiti (color is not acceptable) the response was: "why don't the Hatians get with the program. Color is no big deal." Obviously it was a big deal and until clear condoms were provided the campaign was a dismal failure (Rice and Atkin, 1990).

But what seems to be just a matter of learning a little about culture became quite a different matter when applied to public relations. The students realized suddenly the game had changed. Of course the first line of defense is to declare that these people are not practicing public relations. However, one cannot wait for everyone to become a believer in the American way--there has to be another way to operate and I suggest the following possibilities.

A SHIFT IN PARADIGMS

The current paradigm emphasizes the media with the first amendment serving as the cornerstone of the emphasis. The present belief particularly emphasizes that developing countries or nondemocratic countries are particularly weak in public relations because the central role of the media is compromised and the first amendment is not fully supported.

However, despite this issue, it is probably even more important to note that the role of the first amendment and even the importance of the media is not similar to America even in countries which experience relatively democratic freedoms. In interviewing Australian public relations professionals, it is clear that the first amendment is not central to the practice of public relations there. And, in fact, Australian public relations educators were very clear that the first amendment is not central to their case studies used in the classroom. Australian PR professionals also mentioned that American case studies were not as important to their public relations as in the past. So this is eroding the idea of "exporting" the American case study. The Australians are more interested in learning from their experiences and the first amendment was clearly not central to their approach. Yet the U.S. continues to impose their culture and standards upon another culture. However, what seems to be happening in cultures which seemingly appreciate the freedom of the media--is that the American experience is not as central or necessary for public relations to operate. The Canadians are similarly building up their case studies which reflect their culture. There is more and more resistance to importing the American experience as the answer and the position here is--that it may be wise to look more towards an international community where everyone's perspective is welcomed. This is rather different than the typical American way of expecting our model to be adopted as the sole approach to the practice of public relations.

Once I was asked by the Chinese Communication Organization to comment about this relationship between the American experience and how well this experience translates into the Asian culture. Basically my response several years ago was to proceed with caution. It is not necessarily a given that the American experience has the answers or the American paradigm is the best. It seems that a paradigm that best responds to an international community is one that shifts from the centrality of the media to a more interpersonal model--one of networking. The media tends to be a variable that has many characteristics. To mold the media into a western role may be impossible. Even the French press--supposedly a very democratic press--does not approach the American model. The entire history of the press is more tied to the French culture. It is true that the "increasing privatization of French broadcasting has resulted in more channels' following the 'well-known pattern of private television along the lines of the U.S. Model'" (Sha, 1994). However, this trend is viewed negatively and not positively. The imports

of U.S. TV is considered to an "intercultural invasion" of poorer countries by the rich and powerful.

BEYOND AWARENESS

The American approach to the international and multicultural concerns is primarily an "awareness" emphasis. And with the emphasis focused on the media--suggestions on how to deal with the "foreign" media. Much of the multicultural literature focuses on the "other" or the fear of "otherness as a threat to productivity and efficiency" (Nwosu and Mabra-Holmes, 1994). Nwosu and Mabra-Holmes further delineate the differences between cultural awareness training and multicultural diversity training.

> Cultural Awareness training programs teach cultural awareness by providing information and insights about cultural differences and similarities, perceptions, stereotypes, rules and expectations, and in some cases, the training includes a discussion of verbal and nonverbal communication styles. These types of programs do not go beyond increasing cultural awareness.
>
> Multicultural diversity training (MDT) programs typically provide the same kinds of information as cultural Awareness programs, but they go beyond awareness. MDT's are informed by an organizational culture audit, are more specific to the organization and consequently, have more relevance to organizational goals and realities. They also contain several other components which are missing in traditional training efforts, such as an organizing framework for understanding cultural patterns, problem-solving strategies, and communication styles (i.e. why and how cultures work the way they work, think the way they think, and live the way they live.(Nwosu and Mabra-Holmes, 1994)

One could argue at this point that with all the areas public relations has to teach now, a multicultural diversity training approach would be simply overwhelming a major change in the PR program. Plus public relations educators in the U.S. are not prepared for much beyond the awareness approach. And one cannot forget the student body. Students, in large, are not seeing the relevance of such an emphasis and that could make this approach a more difficult one to implement. This almost seems like a no-win situation. However, there are ways of gradually easing into the training mode. To look at interdisciplinary possibilities and to provide training for public relations educators may be a slower evolution than desired but if we at least head in this direction, the results may be evident in the near future.

SHARING OF PERSPECTIVES WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

As the international community grows and becomes more interactive, the need for predicting each other culture should take a deeper cut on those issues which are so dear to the various cultures. Let us discuss first the preeminent focus in American public relations--the first amendment. Last year I had a public relations educator from United Arab Emirate visit me after having at least 3 site visits to study various public relations programs. One of the efforts was to help build a greater understanding about the basis from which our public relation activities seem to depend upon.

What seemed to be clear is every culture had a basis for their belief system. What I was trying to communicate to was the premise of the first amendment came from our Constitution. The UAE professor strongly believed there should be a religious source as in their culture and eventually she was able to focus on the bible. However, students kept telling the professor the bible was not a central single focus in this country. In fact, it would be hard to get people to agree about which bible to use.

The UAE professor was very sad we could not agree on the bible and protested we need to try harder to work on this. Eventually I was able to introduce the idea of the constitutions as the cornerstone of the U.S. society. Then stress the importance of the first amendment in terms of how public relations is viewed. So the shift from religion to a governmental document

seemed to be a very disappointing approach for my Arab guest. However, at least there was a redirection in thinking and the presentation of a very different approach to the practice of public relations.

These concepts obviously are not discussed in her teaching of public relations nor our teaching. Yet to let this visit pass without touching on the very premises each of us were operating from, seemed to be a serious gap in what this profession is all about. When do professionals talk on this level? When do we take time to deal with the essence of where our public relations is coming from? It takes time to build a feeling for these differences but to miss the moment would be very detrimental to building an international community. To articulate these concepts so that understanding gradually seemed to be happening is quite a sense of accomplishment. Yet there would have been a great chance the UAE professor could have left the country without seeing our perspective and I, too, realized that I nearly missed learning more about their culture. And, yes, I was given the Koran to study. It is not that either of us agreed that the other culture was right--it was just critical to clearly understand our operating premises and hopefully that these perspectives would be passed on to our students.

SUMMARY

Building towards an international community is going to take a major shift by the professionals in public relations. To move toward a more integrated approach would necessitate rewriting our textbooks. Reorienting American PR from a perspective based on the first amendment could be very disruptive to the community. To even suggest moving from an media orientation to an interpersonal orientation could be a divisive issue among PR educators. To move towards a multicultural training programs would involve additional training for public relations educators not to mention the reorientation or students who may similarly not see the importance of a multicultural education. And, lastly, the building of an international community will take an incredible effort to exchange dialogue on issues which as most basic to the heart of the discipline. To gradually build an understanding of each other's point-of-view and to teach this point-of-view will be an incredible watershed moment in the history of public relations.

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